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ABSTRACT

Although social policy makers and researchers assume that research is a major part of the information base upon which policy decisions are made, social policy is by nature incompatible with the organizational structure and time requirements for decision making in an administrative system. Whereas social policy decisions are timed in accordance with legislative sessions, social research tends to be a lengthy process and often does not provide results in time to be of use for policy making. There are, however, other less direct ways in which social research affects policy. One way in which policy can be used is to legitimate a challenge to existing policy. An example of this type of use is the widespread citation of the 1966 U.S. Office of Education Report "Equality of Educational Opportunity" by civil rights groups, plaintiffs in court cases, and in school board deliberations. Another way in which research is useful to policy is in answering procedural questions about how to increase the effectiveness of policies in force. In general, research on procedural questions will be more effective when it is done in-house, communicated directly and privately to those in authority, and performed on a continuous monitoring basis. Research on policy issues, on the other hand, should be done by an outside group which focuses on one particular issue and disseminates research results to all interested parties. The conclusion is that social research is less frequently used by an administrative body with authority to legitimate a policy than by external groups, without authority, to challenge existing policy. (Author/DB)

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THE USE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC POLICY

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The Use of Social Science in the Development of Public Policy

I want to discuss a set of questions concerning the relation between social research and social policy. The general impacts of my remarks will be that matters are not at all like the conventional wisdom would have it, and that the actual relation curtains some surprises.

But first, as a counterpoint to the relation as it actually occurs, it is helpful to indicate some common conceptions about the way research and policy are related. It is often believed, sometimes by policy-makers, sometimes by researchers, that research is part of an orderly and systematic policy-making process. As this conventional wisdom would have it, research constitutes the information base upon which policy decisions are made. Seen in this way, policy decisions require information if they are to be made objectively, and research is the handmaiden to policy, providing that information base. Or, more nearly as the researchers would see it, research results tell the policy-makers just what policies they should carry out.

Reality, of course, is quite different. Research and policy are often uncomfortable as bedfellows. Research does not fit well, either in its execution or in its results, with the organizational structure and the time requirements for decision-making in an administrative system. Perhaps the greatest source of incompatibility is in timing. Policy decisions have a time

schedule of their own, and research has its time schedule as well. These schedules are often in serious conflict. For example, there is now in progress in the United States an ambitious health insurance experiment, to determine how the use of medical facilities by persons is affected by the size of the deductible and the coinsurance. The experiment is designed to provide an information base for national health insurance legislation which is imminent. However, the legislation will hardly wait for the research results. Legislation is even now being prepared, and there are various political careers, including those of Edward Kennedy and Jimmy Carter, which will be affected by the timing of that legislation. Thus it is very unlikely that this elaborate research will provide results in time to be of the slightest use for informing policy.

When the details of policy making are seen at close range, it becomes quickly apparent that policy has a gestation and birth process all its own, to which research could accommodate itself only with great difficulty. For example, early in 1970, President Nixon and his advisors in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare conceived of legislation to appropriate federal funds to aid school districts undergoing extensive school desegregation for the first time in the Fall of 1970. This was the first time any President had proposed what was certainly a most sensible policy: to provide financial aid for the extraordinary reorganization of which school desegregation consisted in the South. Presidents had sent in troops, and had cut off funds; but none had provided funds to aid the process. One might have thought it to have wide political support. But it did not. Many liberal Congressmen opposed it because it lacked the punitive quality toward school districts that had been a hallmark of desegregation policy, and also be-

cause it benefitted the South. Northern Congressmen opposed it for the latter reason alone: it would give money to Southern school districts, but none to their own. Many conservative Congressmen didn't like it because it encouraged school integration, which they had fought against. Within the Nixon administration, there was a strong division of opinion about the bill.

The upshot of all this was that it was not possible, in the Fall of 1969 or Winter of 1970 to foresee that a bill could be passed in the Spring or Summer, and thus to plan a short-term intensive research actively which would inform the bill, by indicating ways in which a school district should spend the money to make integration successful. Instead, all efforts were devoted to gaining support for the legislation, or to infighting within the administration (primarily over use of the funds for bussing.) Sporadically, efforts were made to draft legislation, but these were on-again off-again attempts, periods of frenetic activity followed by complete inactivity, as the political prospects of the legislation waxed and waned, as the Administration grew hot or cold on it, or Congressional prospects looked bright or dim. There was one such attempt: a policy research organization run by a political scientist, Anthony Downs, was asked to survey districts which had desegregated to learn what policies helped and what ones did not. And because of the political difficulties, passage of the bill was delayed; thus those results could have been used. But the unpredictability of the legislation destroyed all incentive for coordinating the content of the legislation with the research results as they became available. Instead, there was hurry up and wait: a frenzy of activity, using whatever wisdom was easily

available, when it appeared that some political consensus had been reached; and then total inactivity when it appeared that the bill was dead. In the meantime, the researchers had developed their own schedule, their own activities, and were carrying these on, in order to provide information when the research was complete (not when the information was needed), oblivious of the peripatetic gestation of the legislation. Thus even when research was explicitly commissioned to inform policy, the two were incompatible, each marching to its own drummer.

Admittedly, this is an extreme case. Yet even if the example has qualities of a caricature, one can see traces of the same incompatibility in a variety of cases where research was intended to inform policy.

I have dwelt at some length on the timing incompatibilities between research and policy, incompatibilities which reduce the likelihood that research will inform policy. There are other incompatibilities as well. These incompatibilties, however, are not wholly overriding. Research does sometimes affect policy, although not always in the neat and orderly way envisioned in the example I have just presented. It is useful to attempt to see just how this has happened in some cases, to get some suggestions of what strategies might be used to make research more generally useful in policy.

I will begin with the example of the report Equality of Educational Opportunity of 1966, both because I know it well, and because it was very widely used in policy, in unexpected ways. This research was completed in 1966, as a report of the U.S. Office of Education to the President and Congress. However, the U.S. Office simply did not know what to make of it. The research results didn't fit with existing policies. (For example, just

the year before, extensive new legislation to provide financial aid for school buildings had been designed by O.E. and passed by Congress; yet the report said that physical facilities of a school were unrelated to the learning that occurred within it.) The research made no recommendations for new policies, but merely threw doubts on the effectiveness of existing ones.

The reactions of the Commissioner of Education and the Secretary of Health Education and Welfare, both very enlightened and research-oriented men (Harold Howe and John Gardner), and of their respective organizations, had two components: a wariness about how the research might be used by political opponents in ways that could hurt them; and a skepticism about how they could use it in any positive way. I suspect this reaction is a more general one at the interface between research and executive agencies. It suggests a kind of ill-fittingness of research to policy that is different from the timing incompatibilities I have described before. I believe this is because research results can legitimate a challenge to policy, and thus to the authority system that makes such policy. Administrative authority obtains its legitimacy from the political mandate which has endorsed (explicitly or implicitly) its policies. Research obtains its legitimacy from a different source: from its claim to express the objective facts. Thus if its "objective facts" fail to support the administrative policy, it undercuts the legitimacy of that policy.

If all this is so, then how is it that the 1966 research I referred to was widely used in policy? The answer is clear: it was not used as an input to policy-making in an authority system; it was used by protagonists in a conflict. It was never used, and so far as I can see, would never have been used by the U.S. Office of Education. There was, in fact,

very little they could use it for, with one exception, which I will note below. But what it could be used for, and what it was widely used for, was to challenge the existing policies of local school systems of assigning students to schools. It was used in this fashion by civil rights groups in school board deliberations, and by plaintiffs in court cases.

How could the U.S. Office of Education have used these results? If the authority structure in education were a strict authority system, and they could authoritatively dictate a new policy to the local level, they would have needed no research. It would, however, have been useful to them in exactly the way it was useful to those who did use it: as a way to legitimating a policy different from that used at the local level- in this case, as a legitimation for a policy of affirmative school integration of blacks and whites. That they failed to use it in this way indicates merely that an administrative agency of this sort is not accustomed to requiring such "objective fact" justification, since it ordinarily operates simply through authoritative command.

In general, it appears that such a use of social research to legitimate a policy is less frequent and less valuable to an administrative body with authority than it is to external groups, without authority, who hope to challenge the existing policy.

If this is correct, then it means that the conventional wisdom with which I began this presentation is completely wrong: that research in education is less useful to the educational authorities than it is to their opponents. It may be, to put it another way, that research provides a window into education for those who are otherwise shut out from knowledge which would allow criticism of educational policy. Two principles can be drawn (tentatively, of course) from the discussion thus far:

1. Research in education will be more widely used and have more impact when there is a conflict between those in authority and those without authority than when no conflict exists, and

2. Research results in education will be more valuable to, and more widely used by, those without decision-making authority than by those with such authority. The very conduct of research, then, will, on the whole, favor outsiders rather than insiders.

A broad class of cases which fits this generalization is again provided by research on education. For most aspects of education, the Federal Government does not have direct authority; that authority is held at the local level. Then we might ask what weapons the Federal Government has, and what weapons it has used, to counter the authority of the local school districts. One answer is very simple: it has used the threat of withholding Federal Aid funds, particularly in desegregation policy. Although these funds constitute only about 9% of total educational expenditures, the weapon has been an effective one. But a second strategy of the Federal Government, in the absence of authority, is to commission research, the results of which can be used to challenge the local authority. This motive on the part of some Federal officials who control research funds within the National Institute of Education is very clear: it is their one potential source of power.

However, this use of research by Federal authorities without authority suggests a broader use of social research in education on the part of the authorities themselves. It is seldom the case that any person in any position has full authority to determine educational policy. There is often conflict within an authority system (such as the Federal,

State, and local educational authorities). When such conflict exists, we would expect the same principles to apply within the authority structure that applied between that structure and the outsiders. That is, the more conflict, the more use of research. And the research will be, on the whole (though not necessarily in a specific case) more useful to those with less power (whatever their administrative level) than to those with more power. A principal conflict in education is, as I've stated earlier, between Federal, State, and local levels; and research is used by each of those levels to strengthen their hand against the others. It is important for me to be clear: I do not mean that research can be "bought," to provide the kinds of results one wants; indeed, to a person in authority, the very uncertainty of the results is one of the most dis-

concerting things about research in education. What I mean is that those without power to bring about change, but with sufficient power to sponsor research, can do the latter with the hope that the results will provide legitimation for their position in the power struggle within the authority of structure. And they have some justification for such a hope, because research results are, as I've suggested earlier, less likely to be useful to the status quo than to those favoring change.

What I have suggested in the things I have just said is that there are certain strategies within authority structures which involve the use of research to add power to a particular position. There are, however, other kinds of research needs within an administrative structure, and thus other potential strategies in the use of research. What I have been examing so far is research on policy issues over which there is some conflict. There is, however, another class of questions to which research is directed: matters on which the goals are agreed upon, and for which it is generally agreed that the most efficacious means toward that goal should be used, but in which no one is quite sure that the means in current use are effective. Much evaluation research is research conducted in just such a situation: a curriculum, say in citizenship or in mathematics, is evaluated to determine its effectiveness. There is general consensus that if the curriculum if effective, it should be used, and if not, another should be tried. This class of questions I will call <u>procedural questions</u>, to distinguish them from the <u>policy issues</u> which I have been discussing until now. With the procedural questions, there is a genuine and felt need for the information provided by the research, and there is no question that it will be acted upon, used in revision of procedures. With policy issues, the matter is more complex, as I have

indicated. Now the question I want to pose is this: just how should research differ an these two sets of problems? In particular, there are the following decisions that the administrative authority which initiates the research must resolve:

1) Should the research be done in-house by a research arm of the administrative authority, or by an outside group, such as a University or an independent research group?

2) Should the research results be transmitted privately to the administrative authority, or should they be published for all to see, with the mass media being one of the means of disseminating the results?

3) Should the research be ongoing and continuous, a kind of monitoring process, or should it be episodic, based on specific research projects which are commissioned to examine a particular question?

I believe the answers to all three of these questions differ for the two classes of research that I have described.

Research on procedural questions should be organized in this way:

a) It should be done in-house, by a research arm of the administrative authority, to provide a feedback system that will increase the effectiveness of policies in force.

b) The results should be communicated directly and privately to those in authority, to give them a better information base for making the schools more effective. It should not be communicated to the general public, nor outside the executive agency itself.

c) The research should take the form of continuous monitoring, almost as part of the regular administrative data system. For example, a regular set of standardized tests, not used (like the SAT tests) for sending children to one educational path

or another, nor to classify children, but to provide a continuous monitoring of the average achievement levels in various parts of the school system, should be part of such a system of data collection. It should be done for the use of the authorities themselves, by their own agents.

Research on policy issues should be organized in this way:

a) It should not be done in-house, but by an outside group, free from the constraints that might be imposed by those having an interest in preserving the current policy.

b) The results should be disseminated widely, so that they are available to all interested parties, and the mass media should be one vehicle for such communication. All the potentials for controversy should be realized; every interested party in the educational process should have equal access to the information provided by research.

c) The research should take the form of special projects focussed on particular issues, and should not be continuous monitoring. The projects should be commissioned to study an issue not merely from the perspective of the administrative authority, but from the perspectives of the various interested parties.

In short, I see two quite different kinds of research functions, organized differently, with different audiences, and aimed to accomplish different things for the educational system. The question arises then if the administrative authority, whether it is the U.S. Office of Education, the local school administration in the U.S.,

will be so selfless as to sponsor research which could cause it trouble by strengthening the hand of the outside group. The answer is that in a particular case it might do so, but it can hardly be counted upon to do so. For example, the U.S. National Institute of Education

sponsored research on school desegregation; but the official in control of that research was careful not to support research that examined questions that could undermine the particular desegregation policy currently favored by the Federal Government. As a consequence, no one was informed that these plans were creating enormous losses of white children from control city schools, and thus defeating their very purpose by creating segregation between central cities and suburbs. The result is irreparable damage to the possibility of racial integration in some of our largest cities, such as Detroit, Boston, Atlanta, Denver, and New Orleans.

It is here that I believe the greatest value of the independent foundation as a sponsor of research lies. Such independence from the government structure (though in the U.S., the independence has been less than total, as the foundations have become frightened or coopted by government) is valuable not for the research on procedural questions, but for research on policy issues. It is difficult enough to design research to examine issues from the perspective of all interested parties when the research is sponsored by an independent entity like a foundation; it is nearly impossible when it is sponsored by the administrative authority itself, which has a vested interest in a particular policy.

What I have tried to do in my presentation today is to raise some pointed questions about the relation of research to policy. When one looks closely at these two beasts, he sees that they have very different forms and colors indeed, and that the articulation between them is not a simple one. I have only begun the task of examining this articulation; I have tried to do so provocatively, but in doing so my aim is that of making research in education valuable both for those who administer the schools and for those who attend them.